

1. Trench Warfare – An Overview



A soldier seeking cover in a trench

Most conflict during World War I was centered around trench warfare. Trenches – complex networks of long, deep ditches – were designed as protective defenses, but led to a drawn-out war with terribly high casualties.

New deadly weapons made it nearly impossible for either side to gain ground or have a decisive victory. Unable to advance, troops began digging trenches for protection from machine-gun fire and artillery shells. The result was a maze of trenches on both sides. Soldiers would charge across the area of land between the trenches, known as “No Man’s Land.” As they charged the enemy trench, they faced massive firepower from machine guns, rifles, and artillery. They suffered appalling casualties to gain extremely minor areas of land, if any at all.

Those fortunate enough to survive enemy fire faced horrendous conditions in the trenches. The trenches were filled with muddy water, human waste, rats, wounded soldiers and the mangled bodies of the dead. Lice fed on the living soldiers, and rats fed on the dead and the dying. Disease and infections were rampant. Huge numbers of soldiers died from disease rather than battlefield injuries.

Arthur Savage recalls his memories of life in the trenches during World War I:

“My memories are of sheer terror and the horror of seeing men sobbing because they had trench foot that had turned gangrenous. They knew they were going to lose a leg. Memories of lice in your clothing driving you crazy. Filth and lack of privacy. Of huge rats that showed no fear of you as they stole your food rations. And cold deep wet mud everywhere. And of course, corpses. I'd never seen a dead body before I went to war. But in the trenches the dead are lying all around you. You could be talking to the fellow next to you when suddenly he'd be hit by a sniper and fall dead beside you. And there he'd stay for days.”



Soldiers pose from the cover of a trench

Source: Simkin, John. “Attacks and Offensives.” *Spartacus Educational*, Spartacus Educational, spartacus-educational.com/FWWoffensive.htm.